DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 176 CS 211 269

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TITLE A Matter of Risk: The Police, the Media, and Crime Reporting.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Crime; Journalism; *Law Enforcement; Media Research; *News Media; *News Reporting; *Police; Police Community Relationship; Q Methodology
IDENTIFIERS Law Enforcement Agencies; Media Relations; Media Responsibility; *Media Role; *Police Opinion Questionnaire

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that crime news has consistently been listed as important in the lives of the United States citizenry and has diagnosed the relationship between the societal roles of law enforcement and media as "cool" or hostile. In an effort to review the perceived perceptions of law enforcement personnel to crime coverage, subjects, 299 law enforcement officers attending the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy, were given questionnaires. Initial findings revealed that law enforcement personnel could be grouped by their perceptions into three broad categories: (1) some officers (114) viewed the media as giving a distorted view of crime news and the law enforcement officer; (2) some officers (97) saw a societal value in crime coverage and urged cooperation despite problems in the newspaper's coverage of crime; while (3) other officers (88) felt there was a deliberate effort on the part of the reporter to discredit law enforcement and law enforcement personnel. However, findings also showed that officers believed that reporters would always stress the "public's right to know as a vital function of the news media and that this "right to know" outweighs any criticism levied against the media for its coverage or reporting techniques. For both the law enforcement and media fields the risk that must be accepted is that of working together for the common good of society. (Thirty-four references are appended.) (MS)

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ED295176

A Matter of Risk
The Police, The Media, and Crime Reporting

Submitted to

Mass Communication and Society Division

Association for Education
in Journalism and Mass Communication

1988

by

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CS211269

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Because crime news has consistently been listed as important in the lives of the United States' citizenry, interest in crime new coverage has been a frequent research topic. That research has diagnosed the relationship between the societal roles of law enforcement and media as "cool" or hostile.

This study sought to clearly define police perceptions of reporters and crime reporting through a national representation. It defined clear differences exist among the officers and that because of their differences each of the three typologies present, a number of potential avenues can be used to create mutual understanding and/or acceptance of roles.

Although most persons in the United States have never been the victim of a major crime or have never even witnessed major crime, they know all about shoplifting, muggings, robberies, embezzlements, prostitution, rapes and murders. Based on lack of involvement, their knowledge about these criminal activities must come through "second hand" sources.

Many Americans are receiving their information by watching a lot of fictitious crime on television. Recent television rating services have pegged crime shows as among the most popular programming for 1987, examples are 'Cagney & Lacey', 'Spenser for Hire', 'Murder She Wrote', and 'Hunter'. Or, they must be hearing about a lot of crime on broadcast news from the networks (NBC's 'Today', ABC's 'World News Tonight', CBS's '60 Minutes') or their local radio and televisions stations whether in Miami, Norfolk, Kansas City, or Phoenix. Or, they are reading about it in their local daily and weekly newspapers. But regardless of the media source, coverage is rampant. (Ervin, 1987)

The result of this coverage is a general fear that permeates the sphere of our lives. In a study of Grants, New Mexico, a city of about 10,000 persons living within 80 miles of Albuquerque with a ethnic diversity which is 56 percent Hispanic and 42 percent Anglo, plus some blacks and Native Americans, one high school senior told TV Guide magazine, "I've never gone to New York. But you watch 'Cagney & Lacey' and it's all subways and real dark.

Somebody is getting murdered all the time, and it's like you have to get used to it if you want to live there. I don't ever want to go to New York."(TV-Guide, May 3,1986)

However, Dr. Georgette Bennett, a criminologist, author and consultant, points out that ironically, it is those who are least at risk who fear crime the most. The 80-year-old widow next door is not generally the target of crime (i.e. beating or mugging). Nor is it the young professional woman living in Los Angeles who told Bennett, "With what I hear, I'm afraid to go out. I always lock my car door when I'm driving. I always keep my eyes to the ground. I never make eye contact. I've always been careful--but now I'm careful, and scared." The person most at risk, if studies like the National Crime Survey are correct, is the young black male on the "other side of town."

While it is perfectly accurate to talk about the massive crime problems in the United States where approximately one fourth of all households were touched by crime last year, statistics show that the crime boom of the 1960s leveled off in the 1970s and actually dipped during the 1980s. But those statistics do not match the media-manufactured myths about crime which critics claim "have robbed many of our citizens of their needed sense of safety." (TV Guide, January 5, 1985)

Nationally only 10 percent of all crimes committed are violent, however, ten percent of network and 20 percent of local news time for television, where the Gallup

organization reports that 62 percent of all Americans get most of their news, is devoted to crime stories and most of these stories are about violence. There are some exceptions to the general mold of crime coverage such as ABC's 1983 crime series that appeared during the same time frame as an award winning report in Newsday, the Long Island newspaper, dealing with crime in suberbia. In both instances, media coverage of these law enforcement topics indicated an financial investment and personnel commitment that most media outlets do not make when they cover crime.

Media interest in crime coverage dates from the 1830s when George W. Wisner, a young, out of work printer, was hired by Benjamin Day, owner of the New York Sun, to get up early every day and attend the police courts which began daily sessions at 4 a.m. (O'Brien, 1928)

Wisner, paid $4 per week, stretched his police and court pieces out to nearly two full columns each day. His coverage was among the key ingredients of the Sun's success and crime reporting's popularity caused the Sun's proprietor to offer half ownership of the paper to Wisner in January of 1834. (O'Brien, 1928)

Wisner's work, mimicked in countless other publications of the Penny Press period, may be classified as typical reporting of the period because of its editorial nature:

> PICKPOCKETS--On Friday night a Gentleman lost $100 at the Opera and then $25 at Tammany Hall.
>
> Sudden Death--Ann McDonough, of Washington

Street, attempted to drink a pint of rum on a wager, on Wednesday afternoon last. Before it was half swallowed Ann was a corpse. Served her right.

This is not what might be considered "reporting" in its purest form but it did keep the circulation informed of what was going on in the city. Certainly changes would be implemented in the journalism field that lead to what is now considered the traditional "neutral," official style of reporting. Even though this change to objectivity reportedly appeared in the later half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth it is not very evident in crime reporting:

> Walter H. Hammond, a well-known business man of Jersey City and a brother of Colonel Robert A. Hammond, was shot and instantly killed yesterday afternoon in the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's ferry house at Jersey City. Peter Grew, a man he had befriended, was arrested as the slayer of Hammond.
>
> Mr. Hammond was about to have his luncheon in the restaurant in the railway station, on the second floor. He had ascended the stairs and turned toward the restaurant, when he was confronted by Grew, to whom he made a cheery remark. Without a word in reply, the police say, Grew drew a revolver which he carried in his coat pocket, and fired at him. The bullet entered the left temple and ploughed into the brain. Two more bullets were fired into his body as he fell...(Blyer, 1916)

or

> A boy of 19, carefree, enamored of the life of the road, ran away from a good home in Elm Grove, Kas., on a sunny day last March.
>
> Down in the wilds of North Arkansas, riding in a freight car, one day in the middle of March, a brakeman came upon him and they fought--the brakeman angered at the lad, the boy hot with the lust of youth that welcomes a fray.
>
> The boy, Charles Hyde, hit the brakeman on the head with a bolt. The brakeman went down, like a

> shot thing, and fell from the car under the flying wheels, which ground him to death...(Blyer, 1916)

or

> Two pairs of arms entwined the neck of Harry Blair, wounded and confessed street car bandit, as he lay chained to a cot in the Emergency Hospital yesterday morning. While his young wife embraced him, sobbing, their year old baby laughed and cooed. He crawled across the pillow on which Blair's head rested and snuggling close to his father, threw his chubby arms around Blair's neck...(Blyer, 1916)

Some thirty years later, as many leading citizens were criticizing the newspapers for being "too full of crime news," Neal suggested that most readers did not realize the high number of crime events that occurred each day. Even with that number, it was an unusual paper that even mentions let along mentions in detail, more than three or four (homicides). A murders' "he said, "must be 'outstanding' in some way if it is to be printed on a national or even regional scale. A 'routine' killing commands thirty inches in the local paper, ten in the one in the next city near by, no more than three inches, if any in the other papers of the state, and elsewhere it has no space at all." (Neal, 1949) Although television did not exist as a major news medium in the 1940s, that medium clearly would have carried far fewer crime stories because of the limited time available for spot news coverage.

Current statistics indicate that the newspaper seldom contains more than four percent of crime news, but because that news is generally in the first few pages, a reader often supposes crime coverage accounts for 40 to 80 percent

of the content. Bennett suggests that ten percent of network and 20 percent of local news time is devoted to crime stories, most of these are, however, violent. Violent crimes are, of course, more memorable: children claiming they were molested in a California day-care setting, a nationally known evangelist taking part in a "crime of the flesh", a prominent state politician being robbed and beaten in her upper-class suburban home.

Historically, there have been calls for voluntary self restraint by the media. The American Bar Association, among others, suggested that there be common guidelines by which fair trials may be possible. (The trial segment is only one part of several steps in the flow of crime news: (a) arrest, (b) bookings, (c) preliminary hearings, (d) grand jury action, (e) bookings, (f) trial, (g) appeal, and (h) sentencing.) (Murphy, 1960) None of these suggestions for self restraint has been as severe as the enforced English system preventing probing or publicizing of a crime case once a person is taken into custody. (Ely, 1967)

The National Newspaper Association, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, and various groups of reporters, have stressed the needs for police information on the basis of the "public's right to know." "After all," said Omaha publisher Harold Anders, former chairman of the National Newspaper Association, "Crime is not a kind of private matter between the criminal and the state." (Hentorff, 1976)

THE PRESS

How well does the media cover the problems of society? Ryan and Owen, in analyzing the coverage of eight randomly selected newspapers, with circulations exceeding 300,000 for nine different social issues: health, housing, education, crime-law, poverty and welfare, ecology , racism and sexism, mass transportation and drug abuse (Ryan and Owen, 1977) found that the newspapers devoted 8.8 percent of their combined news hole to social problems.

The largest category was crime-law, which accounted for 3.1 percent of the combined news hole or 35.4 percent of all news of social problems. This was more than twice as much as the two closest categories: health at 17 percent and education at 16.5 percent.

They also found that most of the crime-law news was event-oriented and that those papers surveyed were more concerned about covering specific isolated events than about covering crime in the broader terms "which can help readers better understand the problem." (Ryan and Owen, 1976)

Although broadcast media only devote ten to twenty percent of their coverage time to crime, a recent study from the American Enterprise Institute shows that "violent crimes are more memorable as news events than all but the most dramatic political occurrences and thus create a myth of excessiveness. (Robinson and Clancey, 1985)

Few media practices have been criticized as severely as has the handling of crime news and yet the criterion on

which crime news is used largely depends of the medium's policy. In the newspaper world, these differences can be as drastic as the Christian Science Monitor and the New York Daily News where, as you may know, the Montior ignores all crime news and the Daily News is regularly assailed for "sensationalizing crime." (Danilov, 1955)

Despite these criticisms, a large segment of the American public continues to use the news media because of what Frank Luther Mott called "news hunger." It existed as he pointed out, because people have always wanted to hear about their fellow creatures, although the kinds of news interest might vary from person to person. (Mott, 1952) Indeed, this news can be viewed as either immediate reward news or delayed reward news. (Schramm, 1949) Immediate reward news satisfies people's curiosities about what other people are doing and enables them to share vicariously the experiences of others. Schramm allied this appeal to Freud's pleasure principle. Delayed reward news deals with such matters as the foreign situation, business and economics, governmental policy and problems. Delayed reward news has an element of discomfort in it, because this forces people to consider matters that may have grave consequences; the reward lies in its informing people about, and preparing them to meet the problems of life. (Brown, 1957) Certainly depiction of a mass murderer gunning down the patrons of a McDonalds, or the coverage of the bombing of a nightclub in Germany for political reasons would be examples of delayed

reward news.

Although research has investigated the attitudes of the general public toward different elements of the media, more attention should be directed toward attitudes that specific groups in the general population have toward the media. Those segments with "considerable" media exposure, such as law enforcement agencies that are at least partially dependent on the news media for a large share of the public support they receive from the citizens the law is designed to serve, would be prime research subjects.

THE POLICE

Because of their rather unique societal role as agents of the government, law enforcement agencies must depend upon the media for the regular transmission of details of crime news. It is the media that presents information about police response to emergency, crime or unusual events of public significance. Thus these agencies are extremely sensitive to the power of the press, perceiving it as something of a measure of public opinion. (In fact, one of the more common public relations research tools involving the need for little research sophistication uses measurement of coverage and tone of coverage as a means of determining public opinion.

In his travels about the nation, Marx found that the tendency of many police officers, both administrators and the rank and file, was to spread their hands at the inaccurate stories and pictures appearing in the press and

on radio and television and ask, "Why do they treat us this way?" (Marx, 1967)

It is little wonder that law enforcement personnel might have trouble in understanding the concept found in the concurring opinion in Associated Press v. United States authored by Mr. Justice Frankfurter which place the Court in total agreement with an earlier statement by Judge Learned Hand. Had had said that the newspaper industry, "serves one of the most vital of all general interests: the dissemination of news from as many different sources and with as many different facets and colors as is possible. That interest is closely akin to, if indeed it is not the same as the interest protected by the First Amendment: it presupposes that right conclusions are more likely gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative selection." (Associated Press v. United States, 326, U.S. 165 S. Ct. 1416)

Law enforcement personnel would allow the general public an opportunity to read, hear or see flamboyant happenings and exciting issues. But they argue, while the media have the responsibility of providing this coverage, the media should, at the same time, provide the public with some semblance of balance in its print and broadcast components. (Hansen, 1973) While a vast majority of policemen perform their duties diligently, the public is seldom made aware of this fact. It is only when policemen either individually or collectively violate the public trust

that the public takes notice and is universally outraged. Coe and Duke report that persons with no direct experience with the police appear to have rather diffuse positive beliefs, none of which they hold very strongly. Their negative beliefs tend to "focus on perceived corruption, an attribute which the ordinary citizen is unlikely to experience. More often, the source of negative beliefs comes from frequently unsubstantiated news accounts..." (Coe and Duke, 1963)

The media could be a "friend" of law enforcement but often police personnel report that they see the reporter, the official agent of the medium, as an enemy. This evaluation frequently seems tied to the finished product that is based on reporter gathered information. (Ervin, 1981)

When a reporter doesn't like reporters, it is usually for any or all of the following reasons:

1. The police think reporters are pro-criminal. Most investigative stories, in the crusading tradition, have helped or tried to help accused criminals, not those who have locked them up. Even more annoying, many notable news stories have drawn attention to police corruption and inefficiency. (Burrows, 1977)

   Moreover, police point out, several civic groups periodically honor law enforcement, and stories about these tributes are rare. For example, "a Watts woman has an annual open house to thank all law enforcement agencies, but the last time the Times covered it was in 1968. With a three-paragraph story. On page 30." (Los Angeles Times, 1979)

2. The media publish allegations against the police without giving the police a chance to present their side.

3. Accusations of police wrongdoing, especially alleged police brutality, often receives widespread publicity. If the accused officers are cleared, this gets little attention.

   This criticism of the media is not limited to newspapers. Police are critical of most media. So are others in the law enforcement professions. Their primary criticism is that the media gives prominent play to stories that make law enforcement look bad, but, in the words of a LAPD sergeant, "you ignore or bury anything that might make us look good." (Los Angeles Times, 1979)

4. Reporters seem to have no ethics. They sneak looks at confidential documents and use the information even if the review is based on a confidence not to release the information.

   Closely akin to this complaint is the notion notion that reporters can release an erroneous and damaging story but be spared official media punishment or censure.

5. Journalists often interfere with what is going on at the scene of an accident or crime. They often confuse witnesses, block traffic, inhibit treatment of injured, disturb evidence and occasionally get involved with the "culprits".

6. Media tends to sensationalize events playing up particular kinds of incidents. (Scanlon, 1978)

In an effort to review the perceived perceptions of law enforcement personnel to crime coverage data for an analysis was collected in the fall of 1982 and spring of 1983 to a collection of 354 law enforcement officers attending the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy. Each of the subjects for the 54-statement self-administered questionnaire had been selected to attend the Academy using their standard selection procedures

The questionnaire included a set of 54-opinion statements for subjects to Q-sort to define typologies. For specific research purposes, the subjects sorted the statements under two conditions:

1. All subjects sorted the statements as themselves.

2. All subjects were then asked to sort the same stack of statements "as if" they were reporters.

Using Q-methodology, these two sorts provided all the measures necessary to identify types or clusters of law enforcement personnel based on their agreement or lack of agreement concerning the statements.

Although 354 subjects originally had been selected for the study, 31 subjects were not used because of subject-coding errors and 24 subjects were eliminated from the Q-analysis because of a lack of statistically significant correlations with any of the other subjects in the sample. With 299 respondents, this becomes one of the largest national studies ever attempted to determine law enforcement perceptions of reporters.

Law enforcement personnel grouped into three broad categories as to their perceptions: Type 1, suggesting that officers viewed the media as giving a distorted view of crime news and the law enforcement officer; Type 2, suggesting that there was a societal value in crime coverage and thus they urged cooperation despite problems in the newspaper's coverage of crime; and Type 3, suggesting that there was a deliberate effort on the part of the reporter

to discredit law enforcement and law enforcement personnel.

TYPE 1

Of the larger groups (N=114), Type 1 membership was composed of primarily younger officers having lesser rank. This group could best be described as thinking crime news is an important part of the coverage a newspaper should provide it readers but with reservations about the perspective that the reporters use in providing that coverage. Their immediate feeling is that crime stories portray the police officer in an unfavorable manner.

While younger, this group of officers had the greatest amount of education (32 had graduate degrees) and were regular users of he media. They reported regular reading of newspapers and subscription to news publications. They did not, however, have regular on-going relationships with representatives of any medium.

TYPE II

Of subjects (N=97) that composed Type II membership, 71 percent were older officers (45 years of age or older) and had department ranks greater than sergeant. Their responses seem to be indicative of general support for the reporter despite a clear element of doubt about the overall value of current reporting techniques to inform the public of "real" law enforcement activities. They agreed that reporters seem to have societal authority to seek out all necessary facts so that crime media coverage has greater impact with the appropriate media audiences.

Despite their apparent support or understanding of a constitutional protection for the media, they seem to be making an open appeal for less haste in coverage which could lessening their perception that reporters are out to "nab the crooks" and that reporters see the police agencies as "less than fully competent."

These officers, all male, reported the greatest frequency of exposure to reporters and similarly reported regular involvement in interview sessions. These sessions, initiated by the media representatives, were held at least twice per week. This frequency may serve as ample explanation for their being on a first name basis with both current and former reporters assigned to a law enforcement beat. Their perceptions are clearly colored by their ongoing relationships with the media.

TYPE III

Of subjects (N=88) that composed Type III membership, 68 percent were older officers having extensive seniority on an law enforcement agency staff and at least mid-level ranking. They were openly hostile to newspaper reporters for their interference into police activities and suggested that reporters were "out to get them."

These officers had the least amount of formal education with that education having been completed at least 15 years prior to the study except for occasional law enforcement based continuing education programs. They reportedly were not regular news media users and newspapers which carry the

bulk of crime news items were reportedly not brought into the home through subscriptions or even read more than one or two days each week. These officers reported having been interviewed by reporters at an earlier point in their law enforcement career but had very limited personal contact with the news media in their current job assignments and were rarely if ever the subject of an interview.

Despite the diversity of views which created these three distinct law enforcement groups, a common perception seems to emerge. Officers believed that reporters would always stress the "public's right to know" as a vital function of the news media and that this "right to know" out weighs any criticism levied against the media for its coverage or reporting techniques. They suspected that reporters would strongly defend the media's current methods of reporting, editing and display of stories despite evidence that crime stories do not deter crime but, in general, promote crime.

None of these findings are startling but they are important for they further reveal the scope of the conflict between two of the nation's major societial institutions. Forced into a linkage because of their mandated roles and responsibilities, journalist depend of police agencies for their information about law enforcement, which holds a virtual monopoly over the use of legitimate force and violence in the community. Obviously, if misused, this exercise of control could have devastating effects on the

individual and society. (Fielder, 1971)

Management expert Peter Drucker once said there are essentially four kinds of risks that one can take. (Drucker, 1964)

1. The risk one must accept
2. The risk one can afford to take
3. The risk one cannot afford to take
4. The risk one cannot afford not to take.

For both the law enforcement and media fields, the risk that must be accepted is that of working together for the common good of society. But success in working together depends on a clear understanding of the defined roles ascribed to each function and the willingness of both groups to permit counterparts the right to carry out their assigned duties.

The primary responsibility of a police force has always been to enforce the laws as created by the ruling power system, whether that governmental system be democratic or socialistic in format. It is assumed in a democracy that these goals can only be maintained with the support and cooperation of the nation's citizenry that are being policed. (van der Walt, 1970) The primary function of the mass media in that same democratic society, on the other hand, is the collection and distribution of information concerning the events in the environment which would include surveillance of the activities of law enforcement and other governmental functionaries. (Wright, 1964)

Type I officers with their greater amount of education seem to be the most willing to accept these traditionally assigned roles. Despite their greater numbers in law enforcement, their limited experience in this career makes their impact minimal in a profession where longevity is venerated. Type II officers with management level professional experience seem also to accept these roles perhaps because of their ongoing interaction with the media. However, Type III officers, whose rank and experience places them between these two previously mentioned groups, clearly place law enforcements role in a dominant position.

Only Type I, because of its lack of regular exposure to reporters, and Type II, because of its need to interact with the media, find themselves open to risk taking. They can afford to interact, if the opportunity arrives, in a variety of circumstances with a variety of personalities. Type III had risked association at an earlier point in their career but had come away from that experience with a dissatisfaction.

What then are the risks that Type I and Type II can afford to take with the media and their representatives? Type I can await their opportunity to work with the media with some degree of confidence that younger reporters are equally as interested in maintaining the assigned roles of these two professions. They can use the media with some degree of confidence that reporters are open to criticism and that even with the presence of some error, the reporter

has attempted to maintain objectivity and accuracy. Type II can afford to risk working with the media knowing full well that law enforcement spokespersons serve as "gatekeepers" of the primary information about crime. The media have been taught to seek out the "official" version of all information and to "protect" the integrity of their sources.

However, law enforcement, even with the element of distrust observed through in Type III respondents, can not afford the risk of not making information available to the public. Law enforcement has no acceptable way of releasing information about crime to the public at this point in time.

Clearly, not taking the risk of interacting with the media is far greater to the society and to the law enforcement profession than is risk of working with the media. The abrasive character Type II might report as being representative of the media and the problems with accuracy that Type III remembered are less important than is the need to inform and to be informed. Despite flaws in the performance of the media, law enforcement should seek greater cooperation with the media and strengthen the communication skills that the younger officers are taught in their initial academy training and that more seasoned officers receive in retraining. If the media are to be served in these training sessions, they must risk making the officers aware of (1) media operation and (2) reporter techniques. But perhaps the most significant effort the media could make is in its

employment practices. Even small media units employ trained reporters to cover health, science, economics and sports. Crime is at least as complex a subject. It should not be left to a general assignment or police beat reporter who has limited specialized knowledge of how to interpret crime statistics or what is behind crime.

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